

# Beyond *La Pausa*

## Liberation Theologies Live

BY ALLAN FIGUEROA DECK

A VERITABLE “THEOLOGICAL feast” took place from Nov. 10 to 13, 2002, at the University of Notre Dame, at a conference called “The Option for the Poor in Christian Theology.” The conference was the brainchild of two Notre Dame theology professors, Daniel Groody, C.S.C., and the Rev. Virgilio Elizondo. The idea surfaced about two years ago in Paris when the two met with Gustavo Gutiérrez, O.P., the man considered by many to be the father of liberation theology. A few years ago, Father Gutiérrez made the decision to leave his native Peru and join the Dominican Order. What he would do after that was not clear at the time. He was later invited to join the theology faculty at Notre Dame and he accepted. That decision made possible this truly historic event.

The convocation attracted 700 participants, more than originally expected. The mix was unusual for a theological gathering: theological giants of the stature of the Rev. David Tracy, mainstream U.S. theologians with many U.S. Latino and African-American counterparts, youthful theologians and students from across the United States, Latin America, Europe, Africa and Asia—as well as hundreds of pastoral and social justice agents from every corner of the United States and Canada.

Liberation theology undoubtedly inspired real hope in

**ALLAN FIGUEROA DECK, S.J.**, is president of the Loyola Institute for Spirituality in Orange, Calif. and adjunct professor of theology at Loyola Marymount University.



many Catholics who belong to the generation that lived through the drama of the 1970's and 80's, the heady period of Vatican II reforms, the cold war and the worldwide, often violent human rights struggles of those tumultuous times. We found light in the methods and message of lib-

ART BY MICHAEL O'NEILL, MGRATHI, O.S.F.S.



eration theology, a compelling vision for an engaged and caring Christian praxis grounded in deep biblical and doctrinal currents. But the end of the cold war, the new phase of world history ushered in with the "triumph of neo-liberalism," the unrivaled hegemony of the United States, the crises of the left in many parts of the world including Latin America—these conspired to create what some observers of liberation theologies call *la pausa*, a decline in interest and influence and a "pause" in the production of new liberation theology texts. Attendance at Notre Dame's conference, however, gave me the impression that perhaps *la pausa* could be likened to the silence that needs to occur in any good liturgy. Silence allows what has been said and done in the ritual to *sink in*. People who thought that liberation theology was over—that it was a curious, passing phase in the theological parade—would find at this event serious reasons for changing their minds.

Of special note was the presence of scores of young theologians, mostly laity, from all over the world. Several of them addressed the assembly on the last day. They shared their research interests and gave practical examples of how they are "opting for the poor" in theology, in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue and in pastoral-social praxis. We heard, for example, about liberation theology in the context of fierce ethnic rivalries in Sri Lanka, the AIDS pandemic in Africa and the struggle for the

human rights of immigrants in the United States.

The initial talks highlighted the fact that in the last decade, pastoral-social agents and liberation theologians have broadened their understanding of poverty. Overly simplistic views of socioeconomic realities inspired by a soft Marxism are over. While critiques of the free market and neo-liberal economics of international agencies like the World Bank provide an essential perspective on poverty today, there is also a new awareness regarding the way that dialogue among business leaders and agents of social justice, rather than polarization, can afford valuable new insights and possibilities for the world's poor. Current studies on poverty reveal its multidimensionality. It has economic, political, social, cultural and psychological dimensions. To combat the evils of poverty today requires attention to all these levels.

Elsa Támez, a leading Latin American Protestant Scripture scholar, grounded the conference's discourse on a biblical understanding of poverty. In both the Hebrew Scriptures and in the New Testament, she observed, there is a "subversive memory" of God's preferential love for the poor. Christians may try to get around this foundational datum of revelation, but they cannot do so. Other speakers showed how the option for the poor is a fundamental category of patristic theological thought and gave engaging examples from the writings of the church fathers.

## A bit of leaven for your homily this Sunday.

Each week, *Connections* offers a bit of leaven — a story, a brief reflection on a current event, a meditation from the every day — that you can use as a starting point for your Sunday homily. *Connections* is not a full script but a newsletter of ideas from which you knead your own "bread" for your worshipping community.

### Connections

7 Lantern Lane  
Londonderry, NH 03053-3905

or visit *Connections* on the web:  
[connections-mediaworks.com](http://connections-mediaworks.com)



- Please enter my subscription to *Connections* for one year. Enclosed is \$35.
- Enclosed is \$4. Please send me the current issue.  
[All orders must be PREPAID.]

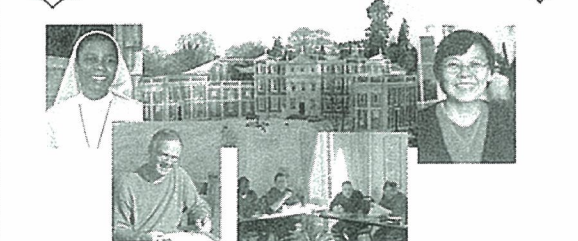
NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_

CITY: \_\_\_\_\_ STATE: \_\_\_\_\_ CODE: \_\_\_\_\_

## Hawkstone Hall

International Pastoral Centre, England



**THE HAWKSTONE 3-MONTH RENEWAL COURSE**  
The Hawkstone Renewal Course has a worldwide reputation with religious, priests, and lay people as a first-class sabbatical experience. With the help of leading speakers, the resident Redemptorist community and staff, the Course gently engages you to look at your life anew through the process of human and spiritual development. Members of staff lead an optional 8-day pilgrimage to Rome and Assisi during the break. Why not join this international community for your time of renewal?

2003	COURSE DATES	2004
6 January - 20 March		5 January - 18 March
28 April - 24 July		26 April - 22 July
8 September - 4 December		6 September - 2 December

For details please contact: The Secretary, Hawkstone Hall, Marchamley  
Shrewsbury SY4 3LG, England.  
Tel: ++44 1630 685242 • Fax: ++44 1630 685565  
E-mail: [Hawkhall@aol.com](mailto:Hawkhall@aol.com)  
Visit Hawkstone today: [www.hawkstone-hall.com](http://www.hawkstone-hall.com)



In his own address, Father Gutiérrez stressed the fact that now, in hindsight, one can see that a common, popular understanding of liberation theology made the mistake of thinking that the foundations for it were anthropocentric and not theocentric. The stress given to the contextual and social science analyses as a first moment in the process of theological reflection helps explain this anthropocentric drive. This “turn to the subject” and to the reality of the human in liberation theology’s method is common enough in 20th-century theology. But that necessary first moment in the method is grounded on something else. Father Gutiérrez spoke eloquently (in English, which he now uses more than ever) about “the memory of God” in the Bible. Concern for the other, especially the least, the most seemingly insignificant, is a divine quality that is echoed over and over again in the Scriptures. Liberation theology is about God. What kind of God have we come to know in Jesus Christ? Liberation theologies shed light on God’s love for the forgotten of this earth and they invite believers to be disciples of Jesus Christ.

Father Gutiérrez and several speakers insisted on three interrelated aspects of liberation theology that have emerged more clearly in the past decade: (1) the truly theological aspect that provides a basis for ongoing developments in Christology, ecclesiology and other areas of systematic theology, (2) the social-pastoral aspects that illumina-


nate all forms of Christian praxis and (3) the spiritual aspects that powerfully remind us that this is a theology that understands the discipleship of Jesus Christ in terms of self-giving to others out of love—“being men and women for others,” to use the phrase coined by the late Pedro Arrupe, S.J., superior general of the Society of Jesus. A constant theme of the Notre Dame gathering was that the option for the poor today is deeply functional, with an apostolic spirituality of service with and for the marginalized of this earth.

With characteristic brilliance, the Rev. David Tracy of the University of Chicago reinforced and expanded on Father Gutiérrez’s words. He spoke about the similarity between liberation theology and the postmodern “turn to the other.” He traced the mystical, prophetic and political understanding of God using biblical instances as well as examples from the whole range of Western philosophy and theology. In what can only be called a theological tour de force, he expanded his vision to embrace Christianity’s current dialogue with world religions and with postmodernism. He sketched points of contact and areas for possible future dialogue centered on the mystical-political understanding of God.

Shawn Copeland, an African-American theologian who is president-elect of the Catholic Theological Society of America, suggested that the option for the poor is mak-

## Summer at Oblate 2003


*Spirituality for Collaborative Ministry*  
*Leadership and Collaborative Roles in the Church*



5th Annual Summer at Oblate  
June 16th to 20th  
San Antonio, Texas

Credit or Non-Credit Option  
Oblate School of Theology Campus  
Continuing Education Units Available  
Visit our website for further information,  
application and costs at [www.ost.edu](http://www.ost.edu)  
Contact: Sr. Marcella Hoelsl, MM at  
(210) 341-1366 or [mhoelsl@ost.edu](mailto:mhoelsl@ost.edu)

Oblate School of Theology  
285 Oblate Drive, San Antonio, Texas 78216-6693  
(210) 341-1366 Fax (210) 341-4519 • [info@ost.edu](mailto:info@ost.edu)  
[www.ost.edu](http://www.ost.edu)



## RELAX WITH GOD Minister to Yourself

### Mid-life Sabbatical in the San Francisco Bay Area

**Integrate** *theology, spirituality, ministry*  
**Deepen** *your journey with God*  
**Nurture** *personal development*



**SCHOOL OF APPLIED THEOLOGY**  
Graduate Theological Union  
2400 Ridge Road  
Berkeley, CA 94709

*Four Months, Fall/Spring or Nine Months*  
*Continuing Education Units Offered*  
*Room/Board available on site • Partial Scholarships*

**510-652-1651 ♦ 800-831-0555**  
**[satgtu@aol.com](mailto:satgtu@aol.com) ♦ [www.satgtu.org](http://www.satgtu.org)**

*Serving laity, clergy and religious since 1960*



ing new demands on theologians. One of them is the need to move beyond the academy. Today there is need for "migrant theologians," who reflect on the marginal realities of the excluded: racial and ethnic groups, the economically poor, oppressed women and gay and lesbian people. María Pilar Aquino, a Latina theologian, made a rousing plea on behalf of women in the context of dehumanizing trends in globalization. She emphasized that opting for the poor in today's world is mainly about opting for poor women. Women theologians, including Notre Dame's Mary Catherine Hilbert, O.P., reminded us about the ongoing and considerable contributions of feminism to a women's theology of liberation.

John Markey, a Dominican priest, was one of the young theologians who shared what they are doing now in the development of liberation theology. Father Markey is publishing a book on ecclesiology. He struggles with a thought that was in the minds of many during the Notre Dame conference. How can Catholic social teaching be an ally of liberation theology and vice-versa, if the church institutionally fails to walk the walk of "opting for the poor"? The scandals of sexual abuse by priests and the failure of bishops all over the world, not just in the United States, to address the evil—together with ongoing limitations on the laity's, especially women's, roles in ecclesial leadership—seriously deprive the church of credibility in basic areas of social and ethical concern. A root cause of this lack of credibility is found in a certain practice of hierarchy, one that makes an idol of its hierarchical constitution and institutional well-being. The problem of credibility, moreover, is getting worse as the scandals in the United States bring these matters under unprecedented scrutiny in other parts of the world.

Yes, the conference had its difficult moments of recognition when challenges facing a church struggling to be true to its deepest identity and committed to the poor seemed overwhelming. Yet the tone was unmistakably hopeful. The Notre Dame conference was a real eye-opener and a "happening." The presence of Gustavo Gutiérrez at such an influential Catholic university, together with U.S. Latino Catholic thinkers of the caliber of Virgilio Elizondo, suggest a horizon of new possibilities. The number of participants, their geographic, racial and ethnic diversity, along with the congenial mingling of practitioners and theoreticians, made this conference a watershed moment. After having undergone a period of reflective calm—*la pausa*—liberation theology lives. Its methods and message have taken root in the lives and passions of too many people in too many places and in too many ways. If one can conclude anything from this conference, it is that reports of the demise of liberation theology are definitely premature. **A**

## Theology and Religious Studies



### *Academic Work in Service of the Church Transforming the World*

*B.A. in religious studies and theology*

*M.A. in Catholic theology, Church history, religion and culture, religious education/ catechetics and spirituality*

*M.Div. in Catholic theology and Hispanic ministry*

*M.R.E. in religious education*

*S.T.B., S.T.L. in biblical theology, sacramental theology and liturgical studies, systematic theology and moral theology*

*Joint master's programs with the School of Library and Information Science and the Department of Education*

*Certificate in Hispanic pastoral leadership*

*Fourteen areas of doctoral concentration for D.Min., Ph.D., S.T.D., including:*

- Biblical studies and theology
- Church history and historical theology
- Interreligious dialogue and religious studies
- Liturgical studies and sacramental theology
- Moral and systematic theology
- Religion and culture
- Religious education/catechesis
- Pastoral care and counseling
- Spirituality and adult spiritual formation

*Study with 40 prominent international faculty members*

#### **Financial Aid**

The school disburses up to 10 new doctoral scholarships per year to entering students of exceptional promise. Stipends of up to \$15,000 per year are available for up to a total of three years. Some merit tuition scholarships, renewable each year, are also awarded. Teaching and research assistantships are available in increments from \$4,000 to \$12,500 per year to qualified students. Half-tuition M.A. scholarships are awarded to those who plan to teach in Catholic secondary schools.

#### **For information and application forms, contact:**

Diana McCown • Office of Graduate Admissions, The Catholic University of America, Washington, DC 20064

• Tel: 202-319-5057 • Fax: 202-319-6171

• E-mail: [mccown@cua.edu](mailto:mccown@cua.edu)

**Web site:** <http://religioustudies.cua.edu>